

# CALVARY BAPTIST CHURCH

Rev. Fred Weimert "Beyond Civil Religion"

April 11, 2010

Last week in Sunday School

someone asked what Civil Religion was...

I said

*'It was when religious people had to be nice to each other.'*

Which isn't really true,

although I think we should be civil to each other.

But Civil Religion, classically, is when the lines between

the government

or culture

and religious faith become blurred,

It is when the forms and functions of the faith community  
are usurped by other entities...

whose objectives and goals

are not specifically religious.

An example for me was when

our County government use to put a nativity scene

on the Courthouse lawn

or School Prayer...

religious education and celebrations are best conducted  
by religious communities

who believe something...

and which a family has chosen to attend.

or even less controversial things

like when shopping malls play Christmas Carols,

and decorate for Easter.

Department stores and shopping malls

really have little to teach us

about the life of faith...

Yes, the Wise men did bring gifts...

but I don't think that was done

to encourage Christmas shopping.

It was done as a symbol of adoration

expressed by a community outside Judaism.

The problem with civil religion

is that it creates the illusion of being religious,

without really providing any understanding

of the tenants of a faith...

of what it means to be a person of a given faith...

and a greater problem is that it is so very infectious...  
 it can lead one to believe that they have celebrated  
 Christmas by shopping...  
 Thanksgiving by eating too much...  
 or Easter by hiding eggs.

When I hear people say

*"I am a Christian, but I don't really practice."*

I have to confess that I experience

some of the same rage I use to see in my father...  
 when he would hear someone on the first tee say:

*I am a golfer  
 but I don't really practice."*

Usually before I or a friend could restrain my Dad

He would have yelled out:

*"You're not a golfer...  
 you're just in the way."*

Faith is a discipline...

and because this is true

the first people to follow Jesus were called Disciples.

People of faith, like us, may inconvenience ourselves  
 in the practice of our faith...

taking time for prayer, bible study, worship.

We take money

that could be used for personal gratification...

and give it to provide a meeting space,  
 and carry on missions/evangelism,  
 and care for the poor.

People who practice a kind of civil religion,  
 just kind of go with the flow.

During this season of Easter, which is not yet over,

It will continue until Pentecost, on May 23<sup>rd</sup>...

During this season we don't have readings from the Hebrew Bible,  
 instead we have readings from the book of Acts...

the acts of the apostles...

which provides Luke's history  
 of the actions of those early people  
 who were disciplined in their faith.

As background for today's text

these early Christians had been going daily

to the western wall of Jerusalem's temple

Up on the temple mount

inside the Court of the Gentiles,  
 and there they were teaching about Jesus.

This didn't make the Sadducees, who ran the temple, happy.  
 Imagine people coming in here and teaching  
 about Joseph Smith and the Mormons.  
 We would be upset as well.  
 and we too might drag such people into court,  
 were they to persist,  
 which is what happened in the scripture story.

The Sadducees who were responsible for running the  
 temple represented the religion  
 which was tolerated and encouraged by the civil authorities,  
 because pilgrims were good for the local economy.

In the same way would represent that same kind of  
 accepted religion today...  
 in this community...

So the Sadducees, and we at times, benefit from our status  
 of being recognized by civil authorities...

But the Apostles  
 on being arrested  
 somehow escaped from public prison,  
 and went back to teaching on the temple mount...  
 They were then rearrested by the Sadducees  
 and dragged back before the council...  
 They may well have wanted to kill these Christians,  
 were it not for the voice  
 of one of the first century's most famous Rabbi's  
 Gamaliel I, son of Hillel,  
 Great great grand father  
 of Rabbi Judah the Prince  
 who published the Mishna...  
 which is part of the Talmud.  
 Gamaliel was a brilliant sage,  
 whose wisdom is obvious in this quotation.  
 His openness keeps the disciples from being killed  
 as Stephen would be two chapters later in Acts,  
 by Gamaliel's student  
 one Saul of Tarsus...  
 who we later know as Paul.

Jerusalem was an odd place in that first century.  
 There was a Roman Governor  
 And a Jewish king  
 And a high priestly family...

And the boundary lines  
 between religion and government  
 could become quite obscure.  
 And in that obscurity  
 it was possible for those  
 outside the structures of power.  
 to be crushed  
 even killed  
 By those whose desire it was  
 to maintain the status quo.  
 We saw Jesus run afoul of this system  
 and he was killed...  
 But He has been raised!

**Acts 5: 27-42**

*When they had brought them,  
 they had them stand before the council.  
 The high priest questioned them,  
 saying,  
 "We gave you strict orders  
 not to teach in this name,  
 yet here you have filled Jerusalem  
 with your teaching  
 and you are determined  
 to bring this man's blood on us."*

*But Peter and the apostles answered,*

***"We must obey God  
 rather than any human authority.***

*The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus,  
 whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.  
 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior  
 that he might give repentance to Israel  
 and forgiveness of sins.  
 And we are witnesses to these things,  
 and so is the Holy Spirit  
 whom God has given to those who obey him."*

*When they heard this,  
 they were enraged  
 and wanted to kill them.  
 But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel,  
 a teacher of the law,  
 respected by all the people,  
 stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time.  
 Then he said to them,  
 "Fellow Israelites,  
 consider carefully what you propose to do  
 to these men.*

*For some time ago Theudas rose up,  
 claiming to be somebody,  
 and a number of men,  
 about four hundred, joined him;  
 but he was killed,  
 and all who followed him  
 were dispersed and disappeared.*

*After him Judas the Galilean rose up  
 at the time of the census  
 and got people to follow him;  
 he also perished,  
 and all who followed him were scattered.*

*So in the present case, I tell you,  
 keep away from these men  
 and let them alone;  
 because if this plan or this undertaking  
 is of human origin, it will fail;  
 but if it is of God,  
 you will not be able to overthrow them—  
 in that case you may even be found  
 fighting against God!"*

*They were convinced by him,  
 and when they had called in the apostles,  
 they had them flogged.  
 Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus,  
 and let them go.  
 As they left the council,  
 they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor  
 for the sake of the name.  
 And every day in the temple and at home  
 they did not cease to teach and proclaim  
 Jesus as the Messiah.*

**Here ends the reading.**

The words which I hope you heard  
 were the disciples words:

***"We must obey God  
 rather than any human authority."***

I hope those words resonate within you,  
 because I believe that they are a sign of the discipline  
 that is part of being a person of faith...  
 For people of faith there comes a time  
 when we have to stand up or take a stand...  
 and there are times when we all may have done this  
 which is good because it shows we care  
 about God,

and our faith,  
 and the world were we live.  
 There is a problem with this isn't there...  
 because not all people of faith will feel compelled to stand  
 in the same place...  
 on the same issue.

You have all heard of Westboro Baptist Church  
 of Topeka, Kansas.  
 That tiny little church...  
 essentially one family,  
 who travel all over the country  
 to the funerals  
 of those who have died in the military.  
 Not to protest the war,  
 but to protest  
 homosexuals being allowed  
 into the military.  
 And whose more recent protests  
 have taken a rather Anti Semitic Track...  
 Interestingly,  
 their website has more to say about their protests  
 Than about their worship.  
 Even though I am also a Baptist  
 I would be diametrically opposed  
 to what the people of Westboro Baptist Church  
 stand for...  
 It is my belief that God doesn't hate gays...  
 instead loves them  
 as God loves all of creation.

As you may know  
 I also do a lot of things with people in our County's government.  
 but that doesn't mean that I believe in civil religion  
 or that I don't believe that stands need to be taken.  
 I remember telling a friend who worked for the County  
 that while we agree on many issues  
 there might be a time when we would stand  
 on opposite sides of an issue...  
 She was shocked.  
*"How could that be."*  
 That's just the way it is...  
 We don't always agree in this congregation...  
 much less outside this building.  
 I love my predecessor's window back there...  
 That war and peace window...

Leland Higginbotham was a great person...  
 who stood against the Vietnam war  
 with people like the Barrigan brothers  
 Daniel and Patrick  
 and the Catonsville nine...  
 they stood for peace.  
 And Bill Miles the artist who created that window,  
 put that little plane  
 up in the patch of blue  
 on the war side...  
 to remind me of where I was standing  
 during that war.

What I am saying

is that while I may disagree with Gamaliel's apparent belief,  
 That anything that prospers and grows is of God"  
 We have seen some pretty horrible philosophies  
 prosper and grow like kudzu  
 at the expense of all other  
 plant life...  
 choking it off...

But I would agree with Gamaliel's essential thought, that being:  
 that while taking a stand for our faith is important...  
 believing that I am standing...  
 exactly where God stands...  
 on any issue may well cause us at times  
 to be standing...  
 in opposition to God.

While situations may cause us to take bold stands at times...  
 always leave room for self examination...  
 and room to make reconciliation with fellow Christians  
 who may have stood on the opposite side from us.

In the four years I served here with Mr. Higginbotham  
 I think I heard him preach a sermon on,  
 or mention in passing  
 at least every year,  
 a verse from Philippians 2...  
 which I assume was a core belief of his:  
*"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;"*  
 Philippians 2: 12b

Our religion can never be simply a product of our culture...  
 a civil religion.

Our faith must always be driven by an internal fire  
 a deep commitment  
 which will call us to stand firm.

or stand out  
or stand against  
or stand alone on some issues...

But we always need to be wary that we do not  
stand on  
or step on others...  
our neighbors...

Who may also believe they are standing  
where God would have them stand.

We will of course not be able to stand together,  
on certain issues,  
but we still need to stand, humbly...  
in the tradition of Jesus...

and of so many others  
who have followed him.

So may we stand,  
secure in our Easter hope. Amen.